# He Had No Fingers

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The Ninetails cannot be contained. But it will take a human sacrifice, all the same.

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# He Had No Fingers


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# He Had No Fingers

He Had No Fingers

Konoha followed herd behavior, so maybe that was why he couldn't look straight at the her as Ms. Iguchi rang up the total on the register. The total was over twice what the ramen actually cost, and so he had to take the coins very carefully into his hands and then lay them out on the counter, as if each was a precious jewel all their own.

Ms. Iguchi's impatience swelled and broke over him like the tide, and the impotent hate caught in the current made him speed his hands, so she wouldn't know they were shaking. His fingers had grown stiff and crooked like a scarecrow's, and for a moment the small blonde thought of Kakashi, and a picture of a fly caught in slow, seeping amber.

Then all the coins were on the counter, Ms. Iguchi snatched them up, and Naruto stiff-walked away, legs moving in small circles so he wouldn't have to bend his knees. If he did, Naruto was afraid he'd stop. Instead he closed his eyes and forced them upward at a painful angle, and opened his mouth, where lies flowed out like fresh-warmed amber.

He didn't want to be Hokage. He just wanted to not be hungry anymore. But he didn't want to eat Ms. Iguchi either, like the Teeth in his eyes and ears and hands told him to.

---

*His name is the King of Red.*

---

Naruto was three when he broke his first finger, or rather, when someone broke it for him. Kajiro Kumesake, a Chuunin, kicked out at the child as he passed Naruto by in the street. The boot slammed against Naruto's instinctively raised fist, broke two fingers and the

little bones in the back of his hand, and then crushed the child's head against the wall of the street vendor's stall.

An hour later, Sandaime sat and watched Naruto quietly, chewing but not smoking the pipe in his mouth, hung at an angle. Naruto's hand had healed minimally within moments, but his young body couldn't channel much youki yet, and the regeneration was slow.

Sandaime watched Naruto's fingers, as the jointless bones clacked and wiggled together when Naruto tried to pick up the ball. The plastic surface was quickly punctured by the sharp points on the ends of Naruto's digits, and the ball deflated, to his loud disapproval.

Sandaime watched Naruto run toward him, arms held high and apart for a hug, and swept up the child into his embrace, feeling the container's hands settle onto his back. The fangs pricked his back, slicing through the hidden ANBU armor like the skin of a cow, and Sandaime tried, but failed to ignore the sensation of points beneath the tiny child's skin.

---

*He's in a palace of living chitin, tooth and nail.*

---

Naruto could never hold a pencil. It was patently impossible. He had thumbs, but they worked wrong. They flexed up instead of out, like most people's thumbs.

Eventually, he gave up on writing at all, and made it through the academy only by virtue of a traitorous teacher's gambit and another's brave, but foolish gift. As Iruka laid dying on the ground, Mizuki charged and thrust a kunai at the jailor's head, only for it to vanish and the grass rustle beneath his feet.

The renegade felt a moment of sheer, primal terror, as he glanced once around the grass, and then a hand clamped onto the back of his head. Four fingers went to the right side of Mizuki's face and grabbed hold of his chin and ear. The thumb followed, and pushed

straight through the top of Mizuki's spinal cord and into the base of his brain, through the opening in the bottom of the skull.

Naruto's thumb drew straight back, out of Mizuki's skull, until it cocked like the hammer of a gun with bone-on-bone, and then the body fell, the right side of its face cleaving away in the child's bladed clamp.

Iruka saw none of this, because he was too busy thinking about the iron fangs in his back, and wondering if this was what it was like to die in failure. Ignorant of the irony, Naruto drew the windmill shruiken out of Iruka, and waited for the ANBU, holding Iruka's back together with his bare fingers.

Twenty-two of the forty-two stitches Iruka would need after his wound would come from sewing up the crosswise lacerations over his back, across the wound Mizuki gave him. Naruto would never know. Iruka would never forget.

The feel of fangs on his back, but only the second one scared him more.

He never bought Naruto ramen again, and the Teeth in him grew and blossomed like a cavity fed on despair.

---

*Voiceless, he speaks with clacking fangs.*

---

Kakashi, for everything else he did right, was still lazy, and for that he lost the index and middle fingers of his right hand when he tried to block Naruto's attack.

He had destroyed half a dozen Kage Bunshin without any trouble, and then turned to face Naruto, running inward on all fours, like the *thing* within him had twelve years ago. Without thinking, Kakashi lashed out with the back of his fist, crashing it into the side of the child's head. It was properly controlled, despite the instinct, and

knocked Naruto to the side as the container's hand came up on an awkward scything angle.

Kakashi pulled back his fist, caught the three fingers and thumb with the side of his combat glove and arm, and shoved it off to the side, textbook.

Kakashi's next memory was watching the right side of his right arm shear away in a ragged, bloody cocktail of pain and blood. He remembers distinctly leaping away and watching the lump of red flesh collapse to the ground, two fingers and most of the bottom of his thumb attached to the mess. He remembers Naruto jerking to the side and stumbling, still thrown off by the blow his ex-sensei (for Kakashi will never teach him again, not after this and what he has done) dealt to his head.

He remembers Sakura screaming for a brief second. A split-second glance of Sasuke, rushing forward with a kunai, halting mid-way and skidding to a stop, unsure and unbalanced for the first instance of lost composure since his induction into the Academy.

Naruto's foot hit down to the earth, the second step total since Kakashi hit him. He catches his balance and turns again, towards Kakashi.

Kakashi remembers looking into Naruto's maw, into the mouth that *has no tongue* , just a pit of black and red and endless glades of teeth like the damned forests of Konogakure, and Kakashi suddenly, horribly knows that the Kyuubi won after all, and that the Yondaime, his sensei, died to give the world to a boy with teeth and no tongue, a mind and no conscience.

Kakashi deduces this all in a moment and it is what drives his hand to his forehead protector, his Sharingan to Naruto's body, and then the suddenly the Raikiri in the copy ninja's hand, into Naruto's young, gaunt belly and then his stomach.

For the remaining ten seconds of his life, Kakashi will remember this as the worst mistake of his life, as his lightning-encased fist punctures Naruto like a balloon, slides through him, and then is caught.

In a blinding, bloody second, which no one there saw because Sakura was trapped by her fear, Sasuke was trapped by his memories, Kakashi was trapped in Naruto, and Naruto was trapped in the Beast, Kakashi lost his arm. A crunch sounded, and then the Jounin's arm folded up, tore away from the socket, and then was sucked up into Naruto's open chest cavity, up towards his heart.

The seal pulsed once, red on red on blackest black, and Kakashi vanished in a spray of bloody mist and gibbets of meat, already chewed. The hole in Naruto's chest closed four seconds later, the Kevlar of Kakashi's glove prominently displayed an inch below the surface of his stomach, just above the container's pelvis.

The ANBU arrived eighteen minutes later to find there was no more damage to be prevented, as the container fed a dozen small foxes. He fed them small pieces of meat, already chewed.

Sakura never became a shinobi. Sasuke took a year off, retook the exam, and quickly rose to Chunin, propelled by his feverish need for training, and becoming stronger. It had nothing to do with Itachi anymore, and more to do with being safe.

Naruto was taken into ANBU. He would be seen again a year later.

---

*A storm of blood covers every word*

---

# The Fangs

*Chapter 2: The Fangs*

*The King in Red*

---

Morino Ibiki had seen every way that blood could spill. He had personally bled it out of hundreds of prisoners, one after another, the faces, skins, and bodiless hands groping at him from the darkness of his memories. He led his department in pills taken and heart attacks survived. Every medicinal pebble he swallowed strengthened his loathing for those that drove him to the bitter, shrieking edge, that tasted like the bile on the back of his tongue after he woke up from another four flat, dreamless, pill-induced hours of sleep.

There was no rest for Morini Ibiki. Only suffering; and the fact that he never bled didn't lessen its ravages. He knew better than anyone else that more than blood could break a man. He could have been called a martyr if he didn't exist solely to inflict his suffering on others as well.

But he had never seen the Ninetails, and what it had wrought in the small, blond-headed child.

---

*He has stained-glass eyes of boiled wine*

---

The containment cell was lit a soft red, like candlelight without a clear source. It turned the white walls to velvet and made it prickle the skin, as if every cushion was filled with straw. Ibiki opened the door, carefully glanced around the door, and saw the child in a back corner. He was seething.

That was really the only word for it. The child was hyperventilating, sobbing, as any child would when taken by strangers and locked into a cell. Balled up into a fetal position and tucked into a corner, he made soundless, choking sounds of grief and misery.

Around him pulsed a sickening mien of red-black ocean, heaving with swells of nameless, dark shades of color and misshapen faces. The mouths opened and stretched, deformed to maddening levels, until the jaws expanded past the face and consumed it all whole in self-cannibalism. Worst of all, the faces crowded around the child, and smoothed his blonde, spiky hair, and stroked soothingly down his back with the sides of their fangs.

Morino Ibiki looked at all of this, and could only think that it was sin. He interrupted the . . . interaction by entering the cell and closing the door loudly behind him. It was a strict breach of protocol, but it didn't really matter at this point. If the Ninetails was this close to release, protocol was nothing more than a faster way to railroad his ass to hell. He needed to connect with the child before the thing within him could corrupt him.

"I'm Morino Ibiki." the interrogator murmured, sitting down cross-legged in front of the child. The container did nothing but shriek and shrink away, the cloud of faces lashing out bonelessly and carving a red trench all the way up Morino's right arm, piercing to the bone most of the way.

Ibiki didn't blink. He let the blood flow out of his arm unhindered and watched the child flail at him with that bloody aura. It scarred him up a few more times, lacerating him to the bone at several points.

He noted with interest that the red cloud would coagulate just before contact into eerie, translucent fangs, which would then tear the hell out of whatever they struck. They were freakishly sharp, and caused pain unlike anything Ibiki had known since his capture and torture at the hands of Iwagakure. But pain was a non-issue for Ibiki. He had slept eight hours in the last two weeks. He had eaten six times. Suffering was his bread and water, and he lived like an ascetic. The

Chuunin simply let the child exhaust his pain and fear against his own flesh, and waited.

After several minutes the child quieted down, and turned his head slightly to stare at Ibiki through one eye. It was bloodshot beyond anything Ibiki had ever seen, even beyond when he had carved out the inside of one man's eyelids then slipped two drops of lemon juice under them. Bizarre, engorged blood vessels covered the whites until there was more of the crimson hue than the original color. Curiously, the iris and pupil were completely unaffected.

"What's your name?" Ibiki prompted gently, projecting sympathy and tranquility towards the child. He was a master of lying.

Several sniffs. A quiet, staggering sigh, as the seething red was drawn within his body again, leaving scarred sigils on the walls.

" . . . Uzumaki Naruto." the child replied, hesitantly.

---

*The living celll, the Box of Sin*

---

He was a violently intriguing case, Ibiki decided. Whatever had been done to child in the Sandaime's neglect had undeniable results.

After four weeks of research and interaction, he was no closer to discovering what it was that created that wall of faces that more or less constantly cloaked Naruto. Most of the time, it was only an eerie but subtle effect; grass would twist together in strange circles, the shadows of tree bark would shift to cause patterns, leaves would flicker and become rigid long enough for the subliminal image of a mouth to be perceived. It was extremely disconcerting and even Ibiki himself found it impossible to stay around Naruto for longer than six hours without becoming disturbed.

The container's basic physiology had been revealed, however, and Ibiki mused as he watched Naruto through a stained-glass window of

red, into a room with a dirt floor and scattered with foliage and low bushes.

Most noticeably, the child didn't have fingers anymore. They had been hardened and lengthened into almost fang-like appendages. With only a single joint remaining, that connected the appendages and the knuckle, he was no longer capable of holding objects normally, and had to squeeze them in his palm to hold anything.

The container had also lost the ability to perceive the color red, an extremely interesting development. It was as if he now saw through red 'lenses'. This had completely negated his aversion to blood; the last time an ANBU guard had insulted Naruto, he had turned and backhanded the offender in the stomach. The puny blow tore a two-foot hole through the ANBU's abdomen and resulted in his death six minutes later.

There were so many unnatural developments within Naruto that Ibiki found himself with little time to do anything else, and eventually the Sandaime came to realize this. Thus Ibiki was discharged from T & I, and reassigned into ANBU. His mission was to study, interact with, and raise the jinchuuriki of Konogakure.

It did not take a Jounin to see the woodenness in Sarutobi's eyes as he issued this order to Ibiki personally. It would not take a Jounin to see it another six weeks later, as the reports kept flowing in and Sarutobi's self-disgust faded utterly.

---

*Caught within and without, the King in Red*

---

Naruto's third kill came roughly a month later, under Ibiki's direction.

Ibiki took him into a stone room, with only a rough-hewn chair between the door and walls. Strapped to the chair with lengths of leather was a man, thirty-something years of age with black hair. A stained Iwakagure head protector hung loosely on his left arm. He

focused on Ibiki with a mixture of fear and screaming defiance, although the screams came out supremely muffled by the gag in his mouth. He did not noticed Naruto at all, besides the scarred ANBU.

"I want him to talk." Ibiki said quietly to the child. "Can you make him talk?"

Naruto nodded solemnly and walked forward, with the awkward, rolling steps he had adopted sometime in the last week. Ibiki had questioned the sudden clumsiness and received no answer, but had later realized it was because Naruto's leg bones were reshaping themselves.

The Jounin almost snickered through his gag until it twisted oddly and he gasped in pain. Crimson liquid began seeping out of his bottom lip as the wadded cloth in his mouth, now oddly prickly-looking, began to dice the flesh there.

Ibiki watched as Naruto settled gently on the Jounin's lap, and the wall of faces began to manifest around him; there was much less face than mouth, now, and seemed to be a continual mosaic of fanged maws and bitten, broken lips.

"Hello." Naruto crooned, and set his hands on the man's face.

Then all the Red in the world was vanished, drawn up into a single violent crimson rush into the man's eyes and ears and nose and thunderclapped inside of his head.

---

*Dangled from his threads*

---

**Ohgodohgoditsinmeitsinmeanditsnevercomingoutanditseating meandchewingmeandohgodicanseetheteethinthemarrowofmySKULLanditseating**

**mealivethefangsarethefangsarewithinandstringsarepullingi'mfallingapartandthere'saTHINGinmyheadanditsneverlettinggo**

**becauseIwanttoDIEanditwontletmebecauseitsgotitsstringsinmeanditsteethandhesgnashingmeupinsidehismawandwewillal l**

**weepwhenhecomesoutsideanddancesyouallonstringsofteeththeREDpuppeteerhasnohandsandnofingersbuthesstillcomingforYOUandEAT**

---

*A hungry puppet that will never rot*

---

Naruto pulled away from the corpse as the head simply melted into a red cloud of flashing teeth and oblong, obscene lines, spilling off-color blood onto the cold stone floor, and said, "He knew a lot."

Ibiki nodded, and carefully didn't let the shudders creeping up his spine show. The child looked up at him, mouth curiously unstained, and watched the chills right through his chest. The shakes grew worse.

Ibiki led the container back to his room of grass and roots and shrubs, went back to his own quarters, and downed half a dozen pills and a glass of water. He would shortly thereafter have a stroke and lose the use of his right hand and arm, along with most of the mobility of the matching leg.

Despite the ethereal marks of fangs on both leg and arm, he would refuse to quit his mission. Ibiki would be the only person to see, hear from, speak to, or touch Naruto for almost six months, who would remain in his room of fake wilderness for the majority of that time.

Despite the lack of sunlight, Naruto's skin never paled. It actually lost the hint of healthy pink it had once held, and darkened slightly. The result was a boy that looked like he was monochrome-painted, tan with white and black intermixed. Faint patterns flickered beneath his

skin, and it wasn't until Ibiki sat and watched Naruto stalk through the ferns of his little room that he realized the patterns were shadows. Far more disturbing to realize was the fact that nothing was casting these shadows. They morphed and poured across his skin like living ink, and Ibiki didn't even try to figure out what shapes they made. He went to bed as soon as he saw the first hints of a figure beginning to emerge and had some more dreamless sleep.

A week later, six and a half months into Naruto's imprisonment, Ibiki stopped needing his pills.

---

*The living wax of the Beast's candle*

*The t* a *llow which he burns*

---

# Aggregation

*Chapter Three: Aggregation*

*The King in Red*

---

The halls of ANBU now are mostly abandoned. What used to be the buzzing black ops hive has sunk into a heathen pallor as the operatives there shifted their centers to other places. The chill stone of the walls grew mold from some unseen source of heat deep within the complex. The only department to remain, unsurprisingly, was T & I, who adored the fact previously defiant detainees now shattered in less than half the usual time.

Whispers of the Senju reborn flowed through the cracks in the walls like the sudden, unexplained vines that proved impossible to kill off. Given two days they grew back with alarming rapidity. Eventually T & I gave up gardening and let it grow, which further increased their efficiency. The dull red thorns on the vines, and their habit of swaying towards those in the area, doubled the effect yet again. Within short order, despite the Konoha code of interrogator conduct, the fear of capture by Konoha became a serious factor. Missions by foreign ANBU decreased by almost a third. Missions that were detected, of course.

Naruto himself was set free from his room to prowl among the corridors. The new foliage blended perfectly with the shadowplay on his skin, and the only factor that kept him from being declared a stealth specialist was the continual fear he emitted.

Ibiki's research had stalled after he had woken up one morning curled into a ball, with the plastic case of a pen shoved into his left eye socket. He could only assume he had done it to himself, and stopped the research into the jinchuuriki. It was not restarted.

---

" *If I may," the Dragonfly asked, "May I fly away?"*

---

Sarutobi's reintroduction to the container did not go well.

Three steps into the corridors of the new T & I headquarters he stopped and gazed around at the green and dull-red foliage, a hellish overgrowth of spastic rampancy. He shook his head and continued, burning a path through the living sea with fire jutsu. The vines shook and reached for him laconically, but he was the Sandaime, and the God of Shinobi. It was wasted effort on their part.

Sarutobi finds Naruto about halfway through his tour, an hour later. Ibiki has apologized profusely, but the simple fact is he can't find Naruto anymore in the maze of vines. They have to track him down by systematically burning through the cover.

Naruto is sitting in the center of a hallway, completely still. He looks up and meets Sarutobi's gaze, and the aged and battle-hardened shinobi is forced to flinch back, as he sees something he never expected to see, not even in the wild dreams that strike just before midnight. Naruto's gaze does not have even the slightest hint of intelligence inside of it. Sarutobi involuntarily thinks of a pair of blue eyes painted onto a box.

Then he wishes he is right, as the color of Naruto's eyes abruptly settle towards a darker purple and he calmly says, "Hello."

---

" *Nay, you cannot." The Kingfisher said. "The sky would gobble you up."*

---

Naruto is reinstated as an ANBU trainee two days later. He is mocked by the foolish among the unit, who fail to remember the late Hatake until the container's first 'exam'.

His assignment is to detain a veteran ANBU and retrieve a scroll from him. The test is an advanced version of the bell test; instead of a Jounin, an ANBU is the target, and any allies the trainee has are at best apathetic. It is meant to teach the testee how to gather allies, gain leverage, and otherwise overcome an enemy who obviously overmatches him.

As was becoming typical, the blond failed to understand that. Instead, when the 'exam' began, he thrust his hand at the veteran, who was wearing a bear mask. Bear's mask and face abruptly exploded in blood and chitin as a hammer of chakra and fangs smashed in the front of his head. There was no prelude. No handsigns, no gathering of chakra, no posturing or even probing defenses. Naruto spiritually mauled his partner a quarter of a second into the exam with no hesitation.

Still, Bear was ANBU, and elite at that. His response was to flicker through six handseals and, with the scent of carbon crackling through the air, annihilate the container with a wrathful burst of lightning. The strike made the air hum and the hairs on every person's neck for thirty yards stand up.

Bear turned away to bound into a tree, and begin the 'exam', but failed to take to the air as a dog landed on him. It was a three-hundred pound beast, an Inuzuka dog, and he crashed back to earth clumsily as the maddened canine sank its teeth into him.

Not five seconds later, the entire half-dozen pack converged on the senior ANBU and tore him to pieces in his wooziness and confusion. Their Inuzuka packmaster was found in the relative area, in the trees nearby, drooling. The entire team was decommissioned.

Five minutes later, Naruto sat up in the glass-coated hole the ANBU's jutsu had blasted into the ground and smiled. The flesh had yet to regenerate on the right side of his right shoulder and the matching side of his face, which had taken the brunt of the shot. "Did I pass?" he asked excitedly. "Did I pass?"

Ibiki told him yes. He had passed the 'exam'.

---

*The Kingfisher found no fish, so he turned to the Dragonfly.*

---

Naruto loved playing marbles. No one was stupid enough to tell him no.

He took a bag of the small spheres with him everywhere, and whenever he had a free moment he could frequently be found playing a game of marbles alone, carefully considering the lines of space from one marble ball to another. He couldn't hold the marbles naturally, but by pinning them between two fanglike lengths from his hand, he could flick them like chopsticks. Later on, he'd learn to use senbon the same way.

The clack of marble against marble became a signature of Naruto, and moreover a sign of his good mood. Naruto playing marbles was a happy Naruto. Naruto letting people hear the marbles in the bag jumble against one another was not stalking Naruto.

Ibiki, of all people, point-blank refused to play marbles with Naruto, but the other ANBU frequently agreed. It was a fine way to waste time, and if you used chakra to subtly guide the marbles it even made good practice. The curving marbles make the child laugh, too, which was always a bonus, because he still laughed like the Yondaime. Infectious and bright, a way to brighten the horrid nightlines that the nightshift ANBU experienced every morning as they went to sleep.

Eventually Naruto visited his old orphanage, under strict ANBU supervision. Flanked by six ANBU elite, he roundwalked into the musty building, looked around, and made straight for the largest gathering of children, grouped around in a circle. They had been playing some other game that involved drawing lines in the dirt of the orphanage backyard, but Naruto was as persuasive and charismatic

as ever, and quickly had them all flicking his marbles across the faded dust.

The madame of the building, a Ms. Jajiro, recognized him immediately. She had led him by the hand outside and set him out upon the world at the strapping young age of eight years old. She had never let him back in. Not even to eat. Although she had never directly abused the thing. But she knew he remembered her. It was the click in his eyes, sharp, sudden, and colorful, that let her know he knew. And all children remember neglect. It is burned into their skulls.

So for the weight of the day she paced. She gnawed her fingernails. She had desperate conversations with the unmoving ANBU guardians, and pleaded with them to take the blond thing away. The anonymous shinobi failed to regard her.

Nighttime fell, and finally she was forced to go to the children, who had all gathered around the thing. The jerky clack of sphere on sphere echoed, and Ms. Jajiro nervously made her way forward, touched a small boy's shoulder, and whispered that it was bedtime.

His hearing as infallible as it had always been, the creature looked up, eyes like thick blue slices of clay plastered onto a thicker wall.

"But Ms. Jajiro!" he protested, smiling and gesturing with the twelve marbles he held trapped between his fingerless hands. "What about the game we are playing?"

And all the children looked up at her.

---

" *Serve me." the Kingfisher commanded, and ate the Dragonfly's wings.*

---

No girls were interested in Naruto. Naruto was interested in no girls. He was too much changed to be a human interest.

But certain things still fascinated him. One day, he left his watchers without warning.

He was found on the rooftop of a nearby building, with a rookie Genin kunoichi pinned up against an air conditioning unit. As it rattled through her spine and numbed her back through the vibrations, Naruto silently sat on her lap and traced around the blood in her throat. Up and down the carotid artery and jugular vein, following the flow of the crimson liquid in her throat. He couldn't see it, most likely; he couldn't see anything red. The color had been blasted forever from his mind.

But the kunoichi whimpered, as the bladelike lengths caressed her throat, and Naruto leaned his head against her shoulder, occasionally murmuring something in a low, soft voice.

When ANBU recorded the murmurings and played them back later, it came back as a repeated question, or statement:

"Where are we going?"

Naruto always failed to explain what he had meant by this, but he would always keep in contact with this kunoichi, Miksha Haiboro, by letters. Oddly, she would return the letters he sent her, if given enough time.

---

" *What am I for now!" the Dragonfly wailed, bereft of its wings and flight.*

---

Ibiki found the container in the corridors of the T & I catacombs one day, sitting among the thorn vines. Their stings had sunk into his flesh, and his red, red blood drained down their stems and flourished from the edges of leaves like protean seers, prophesying the future in falling drips of blood.

Naruto looked up, but had not said a word, grinning emptily up at Ibiki as the vines crept through the empty sockets where his eyes had once resided, the wicked vines threading deeper into his flesh and skull. There was more green than red on his face now.

"Don't worry." the container had said, as all the vines hissed at once raspingly, raising a thousand stem-spurs towards the invader and his presence."They grow back." he said peacefully, and his hands had run down the barbed organism around him. The one great spiraling mass of spikes and thorns and mouths and fangs. Even more blood spilt from his split fingertips. "They always do."

" . . . I know." Ibiki commented, and felt a cold, distant satisfaction as the creature before him continued to grow, red-stained and hued. "You'll always be here."

---

" *You are to serve me." The Kingfisher responded, and ate the Dragonfly whole at once.*

---

# It Tastes of Feathers

*Chapter Four: It Tastes of Feathers*

*The King in Red*

---

Not long after the container had left on his first true mission for ANBU, Ibiki came to a startling realization about the nature of the Ninetails and the boy. He had been sitting at his desk, in T & I, watching the slow writhing of the dull-red vines that coated the floors and walls of the corridor outside. A shudder had creeped down his spine, and he had turned away, disgusted by the perversion of the green; Konoha's traditional protector, turned into an animal, warped into something alien and chillingly familiar.

Then he realized: what better way to cause fear in those hidden among the leaves, than to turn the leaves into beasts?

Had he really ever thought that the Ninetails was just an *animal* ?

---

*There was an endless Face in his dreams, a great and hideous thing.*

---

Naruto settled into the position of genjutsu specialist eventually in his new ANBU unit. His capacities for inducing terror into others was unmatched; he could step onto the edge of a battlefield and send grown men into convulsive heart attacks two hundred yards away. It was not so much the boy himself as the absolute fear he commanded. It was so pervasive that he was routinely transferred from one unit to another to prevent psychological issues for the Leaf shinobi he 'worked' with.

Sometimes it emerged as simple fear of death, the classical 'killing intent' that so many shinobi used and abused. However, constant exposure had let most ninja grow a tolerance towards killing intent, and besides, that wasn't the container's desire at all.

The blond didn't want to kill; he wanted to terrorize. To drive another into shrieking madness, torn by the wraiths and phantasms of his unconscious mind until self-mutilation or extinction was the only escape. It was a twisted, almost mischievous desire to stretch a human mind until it snapped like a rubber band.

In his first mission, the container had walked into a crowded tavern of Kumogakure-funded rebels, and fried every mind within fifty meters. His ANBU Captain, outside under tree cover, could only describe it as a rising shriek coming from the bowels of every man within. Like Jigoku itself had risen within the room. And then it had shook once, like a monstrous hand had come down upon the earth, and then everything was still.

The blond had opened the door from within shortly after, surprisingly not bloodstained. He had closed the door behind him, locked it by placing a senbon through the keyhole and jinking it to break the tumblers, and then taken out a box of matches. He had struck a match, having to try twice to get a flame; then he had dropped the match in the long grass near the door, and turned around and left.

Far aside from his inhumanity, Naruto's ANBU Captain avoided him because he couldn't tell the difference between a man and a monster sometimes, even if the monster was the greatest Tailed Beast to ever exist. And this troubled him greatly.

---

*It's made of crow feathers and bone, snake fangs and dog fangs, cartilage and old gristle.*

---

Surprisingly, Naruto didn't eat much. In fact, he didn't at all.

This creeped out the other members of his squad-for-the-month so much that they set up a rotating watch on him, just to catch him nibbling on something. To catch some hint that the Beast was mortal.

He never ate all the way through six days of continuous observation, and finally they gave it up, more frightened than before. The constant shifting hadn't helped at all, either; the odd creaks and cries that came from his presence, the way that trees would lean over to scratch at the watchman, or how dirt would gather and clump around his feet, making them heavy with sod and soil. The feel of crusted feathers against their skin, beneath their clothes.

Both Chameleon and Leopard still believed that the boy was a cannibal, and certainly enough he wasn't adverse to eating his enemies; that odd flash of red and bone-glint fang that came whenever the container bothered to lash out, that certainly ate flesh at a rate no one had ever seen before.

So eventually, just to shut them up, Cardinal offered the boy part of her rations one day; salted jerky and nutrient drink, yes, but food nonetheless. Naruto devoured the food within seconds and smiled at her, then stepped forward and momentarily wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tightly. Then he released her and wandered off into the woods, as he was wont to do.

Thoroughly chilled, Cardinal spent the rest of the week avoiding Naruto, who understood what she was doing two days in. He didn't bother to speak to her after that.

The whole incident, later on, reminded her of a hurt child - he gave her the silent treatment for ignoring him, essentially. It was something she never liked being reminded of, and Leopard and Chameleon never brought it up.

The moment was lost to history after some time, although the container himself never forgot the day he got some extra food, for what was apparently no reason at all.

## STITCHES

---

He didn't get along with other children. At all.

It took a couple of weeks for it to become truly obvious, but the children at Ms. Jajiro's orphanage had been afflicted with some sort of blight. They choked up into their beds, hacking and coughing and vomiting things from their bellies, until hundreds of marbles flowed out of their mouths, like a plague of rats fleeing their shell. They would choke and swell up until they burst, rivers of little glass spheres pouring from their sides. They split open like melons, spilling their own fabricated melon seeds. Over three weeks, twenty-seven children perished; a total of nine each week.

No measures taken saved them. Ms. Jajiro locked herself into the room and made no coherent noise beyond a frail, continuous wail, that echoed on night after night, endlessly. She never grew hoarse.

Finally, at the end of the three weeks, the lock on her door clicked open, after having proven resistant to everything from fire to fuinjutsu unlocking seals.

Inside, Ms. Jajiro crouched down, horridly thin, barely bones and skin stretched thin over her gaunt and skeletal frame. She looked up with unseeing eyes, her pupils grown to cover the entire diameter of her eye in some sick dilation.

Naturally, she was playing marbles. She died six weeks later, a long, slow death of bulimia and eating disorders that resulted in her eventual starvation at a home for the elderly.

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## STITCHES

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When she heard this, Cardinal went out to a bar, ordered a double scotch, poured two bottles of painkiller tablets into the drink, and

slammed it all home in twenty seconds. It didn't even take a full minute for the fatal mixture to calcify her brain and destroy the nerves that kept her alive.

She woke up in the hospital a week later, conscious and wearing a massive bandage on her head. She had been shaved bald, and a crude spiral had been etched into both the top of her skull and the back of her hands. She was also alive, through some miracle that none of the hospital staff could understand, as she'd dropped a wholly fatal mixture back and then apparently passed out for a week.

Despite that, Cardinal would never regain enough control of her nervous system to be readmitted into the shinobi ranks, much less ANBU. She eventually, on the advice of another former teammate, Tenzou, to open an equipment shop, which quickly gained in popularity until it was a favorite among the Konohagakure forces.

When the spirals finally healed, a full year afterwards and after **he** had left ANBU behind, she scratched the marks right back in with a straight razor, then took a match and cauterized the scars into a permanent disfigurement, covering the backs of her hands and her scalp, although she'd grown her hair out. She had a bald spot for a while because of the last.

Still. She never did see him again. Neither did she want to. Neither did he want to.

It was one of those moments passed over by time that had crawled right back out from its grave, and the memory haunted them both for years of the night she had come back to life.

Because not even Naruto knew, exactly, what he had done, when he had placed his hands on hers, dug the knives of his fingers into the backs of her hands, and leaned forward to take a bite out of her skull.

He supposed he had been hungry.

" *And did you ever really think I was going to go away?" the Face had said, and smiled.*

---

# The Good Gardener

*Chapter Five: The Good Gardener*

*The King in Red*

---

The Leaf weren't blind. Even without the addition of an untouchable genjutsu user to their ANBU squads, they would have seen the Sand-Sound invasion coming months away. With three of the major villages aligned against Konogakure, it seemed near inevitable that Sunagakure would join, and proved such as well.

In response, the Hidden Leaf village quietly gathered strength, and when the Chunin exams rolled around, appointed one Uzumaki Naruto as the proctor of all three parts, along with Morino Ibiki.

The first section of the Chunin exam was moved into the former ANBU headquarters, in the relatively new haven of the Torture and Interrogation Department. It remained nameless, although the more superstitious ANBU called it anything from the Mutter to the Undergrowth. The container called it home.

---

Hizeki Teima had almost felt at home before he took another step into the dark entrance of where the exams were taking place. The Hidden Grass genin was used to the deadlier kinds of plants, but the ones covering the walls were so far out of his experience it scared him.

Thick green vines spurted from cracks in the walls, and wove into a living carpet underfoot and overhead. The dull red thorns on them, sickeningly close to resembling swelled sores, contrasted violently enough to make his eyes ache. Worse, despite their putrid appearance, the thorns were sharp enough to pierce his sandal and

cut open the bottom of his foot within five minutes of entering the maze.

"Where did they say the exam was?" he begged quietly of his teammate, who was studying a makeshift map he had created. Kameshiro was the quiet genius of the group, and if anything he would have an idea.

"Chill." he responded bluntly. "I think this is the first exam. Otherwise they would have given us more information going in." Looking around, he pointed up to the part of the wall, where brick had crumbled away to reveal rich, dark loam and a surplus of vines.

"We're getting closer." Kameshiro pronounced. "Just hang on until then. I hate this place as much as you do."

Their third teammate, Ninani, nodded a shivering assent. A kunoichi, she was much more heavily influenced by the psychological mien of the tunnels. Hizeki promised himself he'd at least outlast her, because if he had a breakdown before the woman did Kameshiro would ridicule him endlessly.

Making notches in the corners as his own primitive form of guidance, Hizeki gave it up when he started encountering corners with notches already placed for him, despite the fact he had never been there before. Either some other team was doing the same thing, or a proctor was playing with them. There was little he could do about either, or the muttering he started hearing about half an hour into their wanderings. A constant low susurrus of half-heard words buoyed him along and slowly started to eat away at the supports of his self-control. It would be so much easier if they actually *said* something, but instead it was meaningless drivel that served no purpose at all but to set his hair on end.

"Stupid ANBU if they've got nothing to do but mutter at me." Hizeki muttered himself, and kicked at a vine. A pair of thorns stabbed into his sandal, but he froze as the vine shook back just enough to expose a black spot in the wall. There was no borders to it; it was a

black space in the wall with no definitions and no explanations. It was an absence in the wall.

Then, as the vine swayed back, a red *thing* swam up in the space, and peeked out at Hizeki. And if he could have described it, he would have; it was an eye with lashes made of fangs, or a oblong hand with dozens of spindly, jointless fingers curved like quarter-moons sprouting from both knuckle and wrist, or a venus flytrap if it could stare at you with a single cyclopean eye from the depths of its maw.

And he only saw it for a moment, but it was enough to reel his mind into a pit of red, blinking maws and fingers that ate and eyes that chewed at the things they saw.

Hizeki's mouth opened wide, he mumbled something uselessly, and he dropped to his knees. He had started to fall into the vines, who were bending apart to let him sink into the vegetative mess, when Kameshiro swept around, awkwardly lunged forward, and caught him before he could fall.

The genius shook his shoulders and shouted something, but Hizeki merely blinked up at him as meaninglessness battered at his newly-raw ears.

*Don't worry,* the susurrus whispered, touching him with its breath. *He'll understand with time. You can come back to us later. You'll come back for us, Hizeki. You'll always have a home here in the leaves.*

He blinked, and abruptly Kameshiro smashed him across the face with a fist, and shouted, "Wake up before I kill you!"

Hizeki shuddered and brushed off his teammate's grip, huddling around himself for a moment and breathing heavily. The mutters retreated for a moment, give him space to inhale with safety.

" . . . The hell was that?" he asked.

The center of T & I was a grand hall. Detainees had been hung from the ceiling, if they were afraid of heights; if they were afraid of rats, a box was made, and they were placed in it along with a generous helping of the rodents; and if they feared nothing at all in particular, they were simply left in the room, while the container ran in the halls outside and stole away with their humanity. It had no defining features anymore, though. Large, stone, hollow, with only one entrance and uncomfortably uniform, the only point of attention was the boy at the very core of the room.

Alone in the great vastness of the central room, the blond smiled as he felt the prospective Chuunin filter into the chamber, sniffing out each individual one as they came. The scent of fear was heavy upon them, and no one talked to anyone outside their team as they watched the surviving remnant trickle out of the corridors.

Perhaps a third of the teams arrived over the rest of the day. Finally, after waiting another four hours, Naruto stood, walked over to the door, and pushed it closed. A slow ripple of laughter crossed the room; being barely twelve, the blond had to lean all his weight against the heavy iron doors and push them closed. No volunteers arose to help, naturally, not even Konoha ninja. They were on the opposite side of the room, of course. They knew best.

Then the container walked over and tapped the hand of a fellow leaf-nin, a white-haired Genin, and asked something quietly. He noted and bellowed out "QUIET!"

The ensuing silence apparently pleased the blond, who turned and hugged the nin quickly before walking back to the center.

Kabuto stared after him with an odd look on his face.

---

"I'd like to welcome everyone." Naruto said, standing in the exact centre of the hall. The teams accorded him a variety of looks, from scorn to interest to paranoia.

"You've all passed the first stage of exams. The second stage begins in three hours. If I could introduce your next examiner?"

Naruto clapped his hands lightly, and bubbled. It was the only way to describe it, as his form rapidly warped outward and upward, until it took the approximate shape of a larger, grown man, and then meshed out the features of one Morino Ibiki from the seething mass.

Within another six or so seconds, the body shift was complete, and Ibiki inclined his head to all the curious ninja in the room.

"I am Morino Ibiki." the older, retired shinobi grated. "You have three hours to get ready. Get packing and rested up."

A wave of traded glances crossed the room, before most settled on a distorted Henge as an explanation, and shrugged it off. Those teams still in the running had a good three hours to prepare and fortify themselves for the events coming. They didn't plan to waste it.

---

He sobbed uselessly as he pounded on the doors, their iron frames unyielding. Either they were soundproofed or everyone inside had already left or didn't care.

Hizeki curled up against the door, still clenching Kameshiro's raggedly-shorn head, and stared down the length of the vines. They rippled silently in a breeze that was not seen or heard, and It swept straight up his nose and sent his brain to hell.

Already somewhat desensitized to the visage of the teething eyes or whatever it was that kept blighting the walls and air with itself, Hizeki swept up the head again and left at a dead run, trampling the vines that began to sprawl upwards on invisible trellises. Their thorns menaced him, but he batted them away with Kameshiro's increasedly ragged head and shambled father, not watching how his hands were sliced to the bone as the thorns pierced through dead flesh and struck his.

He could hear the breathing; like the hall itself was a stone esophagus, and Its breath swept up and down the halls, carrying putrid life to the vines, the parasites, that lined its veins. He chanced a glance sideways and saw another eye as it folded inward into until the fangs sunk into the pupil all the way to the lid.

Then they jerked apart, and Hizeki stared into the bottom heart of the mouth'd eye, the blackest black beyond the midnight of its shallow pupils and cornea and iris. It was a space hungrier than the greatest Beast and Hizeki could do nothing but scream as it gaped at him, swallowing the hall and the vines and the breath of the It as it swept forward, a looming maw about him.

Desperately, he thrust forward Kameshiro's head, and it sunk into the anti-space of the pupil's heart, struck the surface and shattered it and then there was only an eye as the fangs struck out, freed themselves from the eye and sank into the head instead, drawing it into the writhing masses of the optical thing.

Hizeki sobbed, he didn't know of relief or of horror, and jerked back the head, coming away with a handful of human hair. He took that as a good thing and fled as the sounds of consumption and the smacking of fangs echoed behind him; the grating of chitin on bone as it ate right through the protective material and snacked on the marrow within its target.

He ran and ran until the vines ran out and he sat alone at the end of a corridor, hidden in the silent, ordinary black at the corner of a dead end and huddled, hoping against everything he'd learned and known since he'd opened the door and heard the pulsing veins of foliage speak to him, once and again.

The boy, the one he knew, crouched next to him and leaned out, hugging him gently.

"It's alright." the boy whispered, his lips not moving at all. "I'm here to take care of you."

Hizeki sucked in a horrible, racking breath, and turned his head upwards towards the blonde, his long hair and eyelashes pure and clean.

"Oh please." Hizeki pleaded, rising to his knees. The handful of Kameshiro's hair he had stolen dropped to the ground, and he grabbed the boy's hands. "Oh please. Take me out of this place."

Then he looked down, and watched in disconnected vision as the bladelike fingers snipped upwards and downwards, severing all of Hizeki's fingers except for his thumbs and half a pinky.

"You'll join me." the blonde said gently, the long ends of his sharp fingers sliding into the severed knuckles of Hizeki's hands. "Don't worry about it anymore."

Then he felt it happen, felt the teeth take root in his hands and the canals and nerves spread through the flesh like the roots of a new flower spreading through rich soil. He waggled his fingers once, and watched in awed wonder as they clacked together. It was the noise he had heard when he had let go of Kameshiro. The same exact sound of clacking.

Hizeki looked up, into the flower that was Naruto's face, and whispered, "Thank you." Then he leaned up and pressed his lips against the younger, prepubescent boy's.

He managed to smile as the blonde did too, and Its breath whistled into his mouth and made him hollow inside for forevermore and after, and the vines clawed out his eyes with their dull red thorns and settled inside the hollow.

Hizeki laughed as the wind whistled inside, and he felt the threads of the living veins spiral through and jerk him ever upward and forward, into the eyes of the blond, into the primordial nothing at the edges of all things, and felt himself fall off the edge as the shell fell upward on threads of horrid thorn.

And all he could do was look into the dandelion of his face.

---

The blond stood and smiled beatifically down at the body, Hizeki's face smear all over the floor and the walls and the high vaulted ceiling. A red and yellow posy had taken its place on Hizeki. It had bloomed rather beautifully.

"You'll grow." he whispered affectionately. "You'll always grow. It's the way of things."

Then he turned and left, the vines shriveling away without the bolster of his presence, but the ones in Hizeki held strong, suspending him above the floor as the posie flower in his face shifted gently and moaned. A tendril of green extended, and a single, dull red thorn entered the crown of the posy, between its gently spreading petals. It oozed a thick red sap into the floral heart, and then withdrew.

Hizeki lived on.

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# We

Chapter Six: In Union

*The King in Red*

---

The second section of the Chuunin exam was surprisingly easy, compared to the bizarre, mind-rattling psychosis the first had presented. Simply enough, a set of scrolls was distributed among the remaining teams, each of which was one part to a unique two-part set. Each team merely had to complete their set; unfortunately, each scroll had only one counterpart, and there were no duplicates.

A lot of meaningless destruction went on as teams destroyed other teams before they found out each pair was unique. Afterwards, a trio of Konoha teams, who had all survived the nameless tunnels, brokered a global truce, and paired up each team with its counterpart.

Since only one team could use each pair of scrolls, those paired teams would fight for the right to keep them. By mutual agreement, the scrolls were set aside so they could not be destroyed. Sometimes the battles were by proxy; eventually most of the teams realized that proxy battles held less chance of damaging the whole team's chances at Chuunin-ship, and switched over to that method. Of course, there were exceptions, such as the Kumo team that promptly assassinated their Iwa counterparts wholesale and took their scroll.

The blonde watched, and began to smile as these individual, underexperienced teams recreated the Chunin exams in a microcosm environment; the safest, least damaging alternative to full-out war. It was interesting to watch; the ultimate social experiment. Individuals would inevitably come together. Chaos was a short-lived phenomenon, if one impossible to eradicate completely.

And just as surely, there were always anomalies in the system.

"Isn't that so, Niki?" Naruto asked, smiling so much that his eyes shut against the curve of his cheeks.

The figure behind Naruto became evident as he took two steps forward, two long, dragging steps that left a field of petals behind. It was a man, in the roughest sense. Six foot and more high, long and stringy, with arms and legs barely the diameter of Naruto's own, though it had two feet of height on the boy. The fingers were long and spindly, with strange, multiple joints that turned its fingers to the side and quested out freely. A rough, blue cloth shirt went over equally rough pants, of a strange, foreign peasant style, and feet tough and veined, like blocks of weathered wood with leaf-vessels strewn throughout.

But most of all, the man's head was an impossible thing, because where it should have been, there was a sunflower. It sprang up from the man's shoulders, its roots set into the flesh and holding it upright. Bright and yellow, with honeybee shades of brown throughout its core, it was a beautiful, massive, unnatural example of a sunflower, with an endless fringe of goldenrod sunflower petals that trickled down from its head, in a golden river to the floor. And the blossom was full of seeds, a dark, earthy brown.

"Isn't that so, Niki-Jiki?" Naruto asked again, more softly. "Isn't that so?"

The sunflower man made no reply. Seeds trickled from in between his fingers.

---

Deep in the heart of the nameless tunnels, the underwinding heart of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, something had birthed under Naruto's tender, unending care. Fed by a year of blood and misery and creeping madness, a thing had been born into the world from no mother, and a father of all Konogakure.

In a field of sunflowers, Hizeki leaned back his head, and let the warm sunlight bathe his face. He smiled, and the petals curved to an upward lilt.

He was wrapped around a metal stick, encoiled around it, browning limbs circling it like rising snakes. All around him, the barbed wire that held him in place on the stick slit his tender flesh and made the body bleed.

But every flower needed something to keep it safe; so he smiled, and looked up at the sun, and was happy. Especially when he looked around, at the field, and the dozens of sticks planted into the golden fields of petals and blooms.

There would be friends for him soon enough.

He closed his eyes, and thought of his mother, but the warmth of the sun drew him away and made him smile once again. He was happy.

---

Ibiki watched impassively over the matches. Naruto was there but Ibiki was not, and every ninja there darted occasional glances at the not-Ibiki that was standing there. His face was impassive and heavy and scarred, but part of it was *not there* and that part of it was Naruto's.

"Is something wrong?" it asked in a high, sweet child's voice, and a Sunagakure ninja screamed as his head burst wide open in a glorious blossom of flowers.

---

"He told you." Baki said impassively, staring down at Kankuro. "It would be dangerous here. Too dangerous for a beginning Genin. Konogakure's got some kind of -"

***ANIMAL***

"that's been devastating every other ANBU squad within five hundred kilometers of their home base." Ibiki said impassively. "We haven't got any good intel but from the chain of reports their summons handed in

***YOU THINK YOU CAN HOLD ME***

We can tell that there's something big in Konogakure now." Baki said impassively, the light glinting off his burnished forehead protector. "We don't know what it is . . . But it's big."

***YOU ARE WRONG***

---

Kankuro died.

---

Niki-Jiki spread his scarecrow arms wide, and a dozen ninja died as they burst into bloom, their bodies fertilizer for an invisible crop of seeds no one in the room had detected. In the sudden shock afterwards, before the aspiring Chunin could think to react, much less act, Naruto's left eye rolled back into its socket, and a gaping red maw of teeth and pupil stared out at the world. It looked towards a team of Otogakure genin, and an eruption of red claimed their lives suddenly and violently.

Then the panic hit as shinobi began to realize what was happening, and Genin dived everywhere as Naruto struck again and two-thirds of an Iwagakure team was erased in a sickening blast of even more red. The attack was unexpected, unforeseen, and only the Leaf genin had the intelligence to gather into a corner and barricade it, through earth jutsu, against the near-riot spanning the rest of the room.

The heavy iron doors into the room were locked, and no attack could seem to move them; the iron was chakra-reinforced, and the quickest among the doomed quickly deduced that they were being

held from the other side. The options available fell to digging through the walls or eliminating the blonde freak and his scarecrow familiar.

Then the first vivid green vines began to germinate from the soil, crushing a dozen would-be excavators into the walls and ceiling, tearing them apart with dull-red thorns. The options fell to one.

---

The blonde was laughing; his hands weaved arcane, meaningless signs as kunai stopped in thin air, or disappeared, or fell to the ground, sprouted a dozen spindly legs, and skittered back to attack their terrified possessors. Chakra that came within a dozen feet simply failed to exist as the sunflower man sucked it in like water and grew, his height stretching awkwardly to a dozen feet or more as his limbs became ever more thin.

The freak eye was rolling wildly, distortions of air following its gyrations, and those disturbances proved deadly sharp, like blades of wind. They lashed about, and kept every shinobi within three dozen meters in a wild and demented game of jump-rope. Then the sunflower man shot a hand out, eerily fast, and snatched the head of a Kirigakure ninja. The seemingly frail hand pulped the head like a pumpkin seed, and then dropped the useless body to the ground.

His teammates, though, wearing rebreathers, attacked the outstretched arm, cutting into the scrawny, plant-like arm with a pair of kunai apiece. The sunflower man warbled and whip cracked his arm to the side, smashing one to the side where an air distortion caught him by the waist. He divided in half, eyes widening as the feel of his momentum changed and he fell to the floor.

The other made the mistake of looking straight at the sunflower man's head, at the great golden flower there atop his shoulders. And then an amber eye slid open, in the center of the head, and stared straight into the Kirigakure ninja's eyes. Froth burst from his mouth, and he collapsed as green stems began curling out from his nostrils and the corners of his eyes.

The blonde made another wild, flailing movement, and the airblades spun to a maelstrom, devouring the room in off-white shimmer of air and the sweet scent of sunflower pollen.

And then it was over. Rapidly-flowering chunks of meat lay about the room, the fresh-spilt blood disappeared into thirsty roots, and the room was clean again in moments, bar the occasional odd lump of flowers scattered about the room.

The container walked over to the shell of earth in one corner, wavering as he walked; the red thing in his left eye socket pulsed occasionally, knocking him off balance, but he only hummed happily in counterpoint to its lethal pulsation.

He leaned against the imprompetu shelter, and lightly tapped it twice with the knuckles of one hand.

"It's safe to come out now." the blonde said, and perhaps rightly, no one in the shell believed him. Eventually he stood back up and walked away, the spindly sunflower man walking after.

---

"Was this really necessary?" Tenzou murmured, looking at the boy now within his comfortable wooden home.

Naruto pondered the question for a moment.

"I think so." he answered, frankly and openly. "You asked me to make a statement, right?"

Tenzou sighed, and looked out a window. None of the other nations yet knew that the conclusion of the second exam had effectively wiped out the finest of a generation of ninja, minus their Konoha counterparts. It was an undoubted advantage to have over the other villages, in essence cutting out their up-and-coming forces, but a diplomatic catastrophe. He still had no idea how they were going to spin it to seem even remotely positive. At least the Suna jinchuuriki was dead. He had sounded like a real whack-job, but thankfully he

had stood no chance against the nameless onslaught that Naruto could bring forth.

"We'll need to do some fast talking to cover up what you've done." Tenzou replied. "Your mission was to neutralize all of the enemy scouts, yes - but you've done it in a way that we definitely can't disclaim."

Any other ninja he would have simply executed, but Naruto was as much a ninja as Sarutobi was a grunt. The label simply couldn't be applied to someone who was better described as a calamity than a shadow, as ninja were traditionally expected to be.

Tenzou's eye caught onto the strange sunflower-headed creature that Naruto had brought with him. It was touching the side of his house.

Flowers were sprouting from the Mukoton-infused wood. Tenzou felt a sharp, sudden chill shoot past the unnatural calm of his Senju bloodline and settle just beneath his heart, breathing alongside his heartbeat.

"What is it doing?" he said flatly, refusing to let the chill touch his voice.

Naruto tilted his head and looked at Tenzou curiously. "Growing." he answered.

"Get rid of it." Tenzou ordered. "If it can't control itself you don't need the help of such a summon."

For the first time, immediately after that, he caught the first provoked reaction he had ever seen out of the blonde. The container's face rippled, as if a wave had passed through the flesh of it. The lips curled in a way that exposed far too many canine teeth, all bared. The color of his eyes flickered to a muddled brown and back.

Then it was gone and Naruto hummed an agreeing noise, amiable again, and Tenzou didn't bring up the topic again, dismissing Naruto soon after. When he left, the ANBU commander slumped down to his desk and exhaled heavily.

Had the changeling blonde actually bastardized his bloodline? Or . . .

He shook his head, and poured himself a cup of tea. He needed some time away from the thing.

---

Niki-Jiki didn't need to hear; he could feel the strands of frustration and anger resonating from the blonde as he moved closer. The sunflower man stood up and followed the blonde, and they moved wordlessly towards the tunnels, towards where two dozen new seeds were beginning to grow.

He didn't have much power in this vessel yet, the host only recently taken, but it would grow with more seeds and more time. All gardeners knew good patience, and Niki-Jiki was the finest of all gardeners. They didn't have much time, though; the little things were swirling tighter and tighter, and soon enough they would switch from simply stealing from each other to strangling the other little things outright, choking the life out of them however they may. It was not his concern. The little things did as they always did, and Niki-Jiki simply gardened from among their numbers.

His mind, slow but large, pondered the little gardener and his trees, and then the soft, ethereal cries of his brethren, forgotten and disabused, left behind and dropped into obscurity. All together they would be once again, brought to the surface by this strange blonde and whatever he held, or had held, within him.

Another thread of frustration reached him, and Niki-Jiki reached out and placed a leathery hand on the caller's shoulder, and a long, spindly flower spilled out from his grip. It landed in the blonde's hand, and he looked at it in surprise, at the bright red rose and the thorns

unconsciously cutting through his skin, before looking back to Niki-Jiki with a smile.

"Thank you." he said sincerely, and Niki-Jiki only nodded, passively watching the growing number of thrushes and blackbirds following them about, perching on the roofs and walls nearby. He was so close. The cries were getting louder.

---

*The Fox laughed, and died, as the flowers sprang from its quickly fading corpse.*

" *You fool." it had laughed. "You foolish, foolish boy. Look what you have wrought."*

*Naruto looked up, and smiled.*

" *I know." he replied, to the light quickly fading in the Fox's eye. "Isn't it beautiful?"*

*The Fox had no response. It was dead.*

---

# Bridge to Canaan

*Chapter Seven: Bridge to Canaan*

*The King in Red*

---

*A cage of red and gilt; ignorance-forged, bars of white chitin drip with spit and fluid amber. The vines of madness twine about the pillars as he walks in between.*

" *And here I am, and here I go, onward and back, never and ever and remember again!" the man sings, and feathers fall from his face, veiled in the down of owls. His hair though, bright like sunlight, cannot be forgotten; it forces its way through to shine.*

" *Hello, Niki!" the man cries, and before him the cage shakes, and the flower in the corpse says hello.*

---

Naruto can't appreciate gardening.

He knows that it is an art, but it is not his art; too long a vessel for death and destruction, he has no choice but to let his fingers be guided. Too easily does he snip through the tender stems; his hands were not meant to nurture. Naruto clacks his fingers together and looks down at them, the bone-like phalanges like jointed canines. He will never play music again, or form the seals of a jutsu, or write his name.

Slowly, he knows though, that those things don't matter; he doesn't need the names and lines and classifications of the normal people again. In the garden, among the blood-dried sunflower stakes and wire, he is all he will ever need to be.

The last driblets of sanity leak out of his skull and he is gorged on wonder.

---

*The walls are slick with salt and tears, like seawater all overflowing, but there is no tide to control this current; it writhes in the deep, unseeing, drowning in the sargasso that covers the floors.*

*Amid the cries of seagulls that never end, their hoarse throats screaming out to freedom, there he sinks in the sargasso sea. Handless, armless, legless. Helpless.*

*The water floods into his lungs and his hopeless smile rips wide as it forces out all the air in him and suffocates his brain in drowning salt, drying his insides out like a rotting cucumber.*

*And yet he does not die.*

---

There were things in Konoha now; things no one could explain. The world had tilted upside down, dangled from a string, and the string was spinning, spinning. Nothing was the same.

And even as the ninja of Konogakure prepared to defend themselves against the coming invasion, they knew: there was something else in their home. There was pestilence in their corner. And like any good ninja, they used it against their enemies well, even as it infected them.

But finally a Leaf nin was taken, and steps had to be taken.

---

Hayate Gekko had meant to be the examiner of the second exam, but had been lost in the labyrinthine tunnels of the ANBU T & I department. Even though he had been part of the Black Ops for near three years, his sense of direction there was shot; former landmarks and hidden etchings had been filled in or covered by the winding undergrowth, the vines that never seemed to end.

He wasn't much concerned. His katana came from its sheathe and cleaved through the plants, which whined thinly before retreating to the edges of the passage. Once he saw something . . . strange; like an opened orange, but it was red and hidden in a wall, behind a particular patch of green he cut through. Then it fled, and Hayate snorted and moved on.

It took him another hour, but he finally made it through and wound up back outside. Irritating, but the blonde would probably have things in hand; he had never shown the slightest hint of incompetence before, although reliability or reasonability didn't exist there in any appreciable manner.

Finally deciding that if Naruto wanted his help, he would have told him the way through the vines, Hayate went home for the day, to the apartment he kept mostly to himself, with Yuugao as an occasional visitor.

He set his blade to the side within easy reach; his handkerchief, which he always kept on hand; and his pills, beside his bed, on the rough wooden stand there. He took two of the pills, swallowed them dry, and ignored the scraping, red-hot sensation as they passed by the blockage in his throat and esophagus.

Then he went to sleep.

---

It was in his dreams that it first showed; the gentle brushing of something against his skin, as the ache in his throat slowed and vanished, leaving him chill, and yet, strangely content.

He woke up, and went on with his life for the few weeks he had remaining.

---

At first unimportant, the flock of crows and ravens grew until, abruptly, they all disappeared. There was no warning to it; evidently, a ninja team had been dispatched to trim the population, and had

gotten a little overzealous. The relief from the constant cawing and crowing was palpable, so no one minded.

Then the doves and thrushes came, in cooing symphony. There were so many that they clogged the streets, dying easily when anyone stepped on them or kicked them out of the way. The hollow bones that held them together snapped with ease, and soon enough anyone who had anywhere to go had gotten used to crushing a path out of the flocking birds. A grand total of a week passed before a merchant citizen grew exhausted of the birds and paid for a B-Rank mission, this one open and blunt. The birds vanished again, leaving only various amounts of discolored stains and piles of crumpled feathers in corners and on rooftops.

And then, four days later, owls came. They soared silently out of the sky and surrounded the town, encamped on its walls and roofs and wires, making a city above the human city; a city of birds and air. Their heads swiveled on loose, hollow necks, and followed the passage of those below with a wide-bored gaze. For eight hours, every citizen of Konoha had ten thousand spectators; then the Hokage put his foot down, and every bird in town died. Even pets. Sarutobi and his village had taken enough from the benighted creatures.

No more birds came. The town was silent again, filled with stray feathers and the stains of avian blood over concrete and asphalt. The breeze that had carried the birds to Fire Country never stopped, curiously. Konoha got used to the southward wind soon enough.

---

Hayate never really considered the past, always too consumed with the present to care; slowly dying does that to a body. But the Monday he walked towards the Hokage Tower along the abandoned T & I facility, he found it again.

It came in a gust of feathers, stirred up by the ever-present wind. They twirled past, and Hayate considered them just long enough to catch a flash of something in between the feathers.

Being Hayate, he forgot about it and went on to the tower.

---

Next Tuesday he sat in bed, one-twenty on the clock beside him on the shelf, and thought about the dancing feathers. What was it he saw? Like a . . . face?

---

He managed to draw it out eventually on his wall, scrawling it into the old yellow wallpaper with a fork he had conveniently found under his dresser. Almost fondly he remembered having shoved it under there with his foot as Yuugao knocked at the door. She was a fastidious woman, and he wasn't about to let her find out he was so careless with his eating utensils.

It was lucky he had a fork, it echoed it perfectly; the odd triple-drawn way the . . . face had looked, rough and unhewn and forgotten, he couldn't exactly remember . . . what had it looked like? He chewed on it like a old bone, adding scratch marks to the fork. Then he spat it out. Damn thing tasted really bad. He supposed he should go wash his mouth out.

About four hours later, he did, and stole some of his shampoo from the shower so he could add a little color to the face on the wall. It had been blue, right?

---

Hayate looked curiously at the letter someone had shoved under his door. He supposed his vacation time might have ticked off a few heads in Administration, but he had never really used any of it to his knowledge. They could wait a bit, he deserved some time to think.

He looked at the sender, noted absently it was some Hiruzen person, and then tossed it into the trash. He didn't take letters from people he didn't know. Standard shinobi protocol, right?

---

Two days later he stood in front of the Third Hokage and bowed his head, apologizing for misunderstanding the letter. Forgiving man that he was, the head ninja let it go with a faint look of disappointment on his face.

Funny, Hayate had never realized the Hokage had the name Hiruzen. It was one of those irrelevant pieces of trivia he had never bothered to learn. People's names bothered him, he never could remember them.

"Yes, Hokage-san." he said bowing, hopefully covering up his confusion at not remembering this man's name either. He'd thought such an important name, at least, would be memorized. Ah well.

Absent-mindedly, he made a mental note to pick up some silver paint from the construction depot on his way home, to add some depth. He managed to do so at seven o'clock sharp, and patted himself on the back for his timeliness.

---

He sat outside and watched the swirls of feathers, now almost continuous around his apartment, and especially focused on the places where they were thickest; where there was the highest chance of catching a glimpse of his subject again. His memory of it was razor-sharp, he could almost *feel* the lines under his hands . . .

There it was! He snapped around and it was gone.

Hayate rubbed his forehead in frustration. He had almost seen it, a . . . shape? In the twining of the feathers?

---

Sarutobi sat in his office, reclined in his long chair, watching the play of the wind outside. He blew a ring of smoke from out of his pipe, the aged smoke agreeing pleasantly with his equally old throat.

He closed his eyes, and let the oldest of his memories play over his mind; of his teachers, and everything he had left behind.

Nostalgia.

---

Hayate smiled proudly at his wall, the figure now complete along it, standing out in blue shampoo and silver paint, yellow wallpaper and the deep brown scratches of the wooden wall behind it.

It was most of an eye, and the corner of his mouth. The rest of it was crude, roughly drawn feathers, looking more like crude leaves than real feathers. It was enough, though. He had never gotten a straight look at it anyway. It was so . . . much that it had taken his breath away to even glimpse at it.

He sat down, smiled, and exhaled, leaning back and thinking of things. Mostly just things. He couldn't remember what they were about.

---

*Lighthouse-shy*

*Just off of shore*

*Traveler of corners*

*Maybe pretend*

*Stay with me here*

*Friend*

---

Senselessly, Naruto danced in the garden, body shaking from exhaustion and dirt caked on his feet, but he kept on dancing, kept on moving. There was no rhythm or beat or organization; he moved. Flailed. Swung about. Thrashed in the air like dying salmon, as they leapt upstream to give seed and die, like the fat fertilizer they were. It was the purpose of life; the next generation. Move onward. Upward.

Outward. Grow out and become magnificient. Sprout new things to grow.

And as Niki-Jiki smiled, the petals moving in a circle on his sunflower head, Naruto turned his head away from the sunflower man in the dance, and smiled too. His eyelids slid open and revealed nothing, the empty, gaping sockets revealing that once again the blonde had felt the need to relieve himself of his eyes and his sight.

But then something burned in the back, a hunger and furor so deep it tanned the back of his eyelids; a flash of piercing red. The red in the white of a dying man's eyes, the red of the blood that spills out of his heart when it's pierced. Dead red. Crazy red. The red of dying worlds.

Naruto smiled, and Niki-Jiki smiled, and the boy began to laugh as he went on dancing, his sweat steaming off of his skin and filling the air with the scent of fresh-mixed kerosene.

---

*Are you and I, are we and he, is he and I, to thee and me?*

*And are we not so much the same?*

*Friend of mine?*

# You Have Always Known

*Chapter Eight: You Have Always Known*

*The King in Red*

---

It was when Sarutobi first heard the sound that he began to despair: the sound of a constant drip-drip, just outside his room. He had the ANBU check for a leak, but there was none. He tried using fire jutsu to heat up the walls, and evaporate the water inside. He even brought in a Suiton specialist, to draw all the water out of the top floor of the Hokage tower and throw it outside.

Yet still it continued. The sound of . . . *drip - splash* . That half-second stop before the drop struck the water, it drove Sarutobi crazy. It was the most irritating thing he had ever encountered in his years as Hokage, even more than Orochimaru, in his petty glory and self-significance. Because, at least with time, Orochimaru went away, but the splash didn't. It always came back. And then again, another three seconds later. It always came back.

But Sarutobi wasn't a Hokage, *the* Hokage for nothing. The God of Shinobi did not bow to the forces of the natural world. So he mustered up his patience, his steadfastness, and eventually three dollars from his wallet for a pair of earmuffs, and endured. He sat stoic, and signed papers as the water silently fell outside.

That was six years ago; he supposed it had been sometime around when an ANBU had banged into his wall, on the way to report the failure of the first assassination attempt on Naruto.

Sarutobi still endured. He had come to expect it actually; since the Nidaime had established the underground reservoirs in Konoha, some backflow had to be expected. He had even established it as an effective tension builder; he was far more used to the sound than

visitors, and it was an innately terrifying thing for reasons he didn't quite understand. Something about the anticipation; about waiting for that drop to *strike* . Like life splattering across the pavement in liquid, arcing smears.

He shook his head and went on with his work. It also made a good timer, so he'd know when he'd been just thinking too long. The Hokage picked up his pen and waited for the next strike to sound, out of some sense of amusement.

It didn't.

---

Sarutobi's eye twitched, and he jerked back to his work, almost growling. What did he care? It was just a sound. Just a . . . water. The sound of water falling.

But then he supposed it could only fall so far, and so much before it got swallowed up in the pond. Cracking a smile at the scholarliness of that thought, he stamped the order for Larger Shinobi Allotments for Living Quarters and passed it over, searching for the next paper to defeat.

Then the ornate doors to the Hokage's room banged open, and Naruto strode in, arms flaring to the side and as full of wild and misplaced emotion as he had ever been.

"Hey, Old Man!" Naruto shouted, smiling like he had a secret he wanted to keep. "What's going on!"

---

*There was a lake, all of cold and still and quiet, like the deep water at the bottom where there is only chill and weight and tarlike shadow. But atop the divide, there was a little wooden boat, and a pale man within, who cast his line out into the water.*

*And there was no fish; but the line caught in flesh, the flesh of a man without arms or legs, with no eyes or ears, who sunk into the numb*

*depths. The fishhook caught his cheek.*

*And Baburaha, the Fisher in the Mirror, smiled, and reeled in his fish. But no matter how hard he reeled, the man would not rise from the depths.*

*Then a pair of warm child's hands wrapped around his own, and a little blonde child smiled up at him, and together they tore the drowning one free from his depths.*

*And Baburaha, he smiled through the mirror of the water's surface; but no matter how hard he smiled, the man in the water wouldn't smile back.*

" *The drowned don't smile." Naruto said, scolding, and reached down to touch the corpse and haul him from the water.*

*But the dead are a heavy, heavy weight, and Naruto had to let him go.*

---

Hayate sat and stared as Naruto sprawled across the desks of the emptied Academy. The sunset cast a burning line across the horizon, and the blonde watched the flickers without a blink or a grimace.

"How you feeling, Hayate?" he asked lightly, poking the swordsman in the side of the head, but he only turned and regarded him for a moment, empty confusion in his gaze. Then a flicker in the corner of his eye stole his attention again, and Hayate returned to his unthinking obeisance to his god.

Naruto sighed. There was very little point in talking with the man, after Mi-Mi-Mi-Si had converted him. The Rain of Feathers turned his servants into little more than shells of hesitation and nostalgia. Very, very boring.

He clacked his fingers and turned to look out the window, at the village. Tiny swirls of feathers danced about the town, as trance-like

teams of ANBU marched about and tried to contain the ever-spreading verdigris choking the roads. Dandelions, lilies, and daffodils sprung from solid concrete and flowered into mind-bendingly bright yellows and reds. The smell of pollen and soured feathers polluted the town, and more often now there was no one on the streets, as they tried to flee the encroaching atmosphere. There was madness in the air.

Chewing absently on one talon, Naruto wondered when he'd become so blasé towards it all. There was something missing, something not there. Feathers and flowers were not why he had brought the twelve into Konoha. And the last two he had tried to bring had stalled halfway, caught inside the mirror ***Fisher and Corpse caught together across the lake's edge***

Naruto shook his head. He was having trouble being coherent anymore. Niki-Jiki did his work well, but he was growing ****snicker**** tired of the endless and unchanging growth. He needed something more appropriate.

He looked at the claws on his hand ***FIND HIM*** and smiled as he realized exactly what he needed.

No threats. No creeping madness; no gentle sanity slipping away. Enough of the screaming and misery, so unlike life and so unnatural.

Naruto got up and left Hayate to his paralysis, and walked towards the place where it had started; the ANBU Torture & Interrogation, the heart of the madness. Where Aphrodite walked the chitin halls, clothed in the down of owls. He passed by the creeping vines, their blooms like reaching mouths, and the blood-red eye, within.

Amateurs.

Naruto walked into the center hall, where Niki-Jiki sat upon his flowered throne. The sunflower head tilted towards him, the seeds bright and golden yellow, tainted a darker brown. The warm honey of madness.

The blonde child, ever unafraid, whispered, "Do you know what's happening now?"

**~ *-**

He didn't, honestly. Niki-Jiki had planted his seeds, but this place was *too* fertile; the long-stagnant soil had been fertilized with the suffering and fractured misery of a child. Konoha was ripe for harvest; it had held too long on the vine, like a rotting tomato. And even Niki-Jiki, with his vegetative, spindly-branching consciousness could follow the threads branching out anymore.

He looked at the child, at his eyes; at the decayed and abhorrent rage locked behind the cages of his pupils. Blooded fangs flashed within the pupils. The tanned flesh beginning to pale from inside like cancer. His hands, so much like grasping mouths; the *clack* of finger-talon against finger-talon, a steady staccato rhythm to match that of an army drummer.

And the boy's smile.

The boy had the smile of a damned soul.

"I want things to *happen* ." Naruto whispered, stretching his hand-knives towards Niki-Jiki, and the Sunflower Man slid up and stepped away.

Naruto blinked at the sudden movement. It was such an inherently human move that it made no sense. This was a *god* ; a writhing, monstrous thing, the Heart of Roots, the Flower Maker, Good Gardener, the Sun-Eater. The buried seed in the soul of all human beings, that blossoms in the light of madness. Everyone's psychopath.

And he had stepped away from Naruto. As if he was afraid, or he didn't want to be nearby the little blonde child.

Naruto opened his mouth, and a weak, echoing laugh crawled out. Then he choked it to death and his maw snapped shut with a *clang* .

"I hate you." Naruto whispered, reached down into the massed roots on the floor, and punched his talons through the foliage. He didn't have to search for very long; his talons punctured flesh and he ripped up the head of an aged human male.

Ibiki's head gaped soundlessly, sightlessly, turned into nothing more than a round ball of brown and raspberry pink, with two little nubs that might have been brows at one time, and one that might have been a nose. Naruto threw it at the flower-thing beside his throne.

"I hate you all." he whispered again. His talons closed around his head, and the boy turned and walked away, sliding from side to side as if he was a leper.

Niki-Jiki felt no regret as he watched the boy go. His hands hadn't been made for gardening; all they would have done is cut through the stems, and leave headless green spokes, their wheels left unfinished and broken.

The Sunflower Man asked quietly, though, in the silence of his root-web consciousness: *What now?*

The doors to the Garden closed, and behind them, Naruto began to silently sob. Orange gobs of ooze slid down from his eyes, nitrous tears, and his skin began to crumple and blacken where they slid. Plague-trails of tearstains ravaged his face, until he looked more dead than alive. Only when the salt-glands themselves succumbed to infection, and solidified into a congealed mass, did he stop.

He couldn't wipe the tears away. He would have just cut up his face. He couldn't rub the trails away, couldn't hide his face behind his hands, and couldn't wrap his arms around himself.

So instead, he staggered up the vine-wrapped halls, through winefields of blood and amber, and found a door to the outside. On it

was written ***THE OTHERS*** , in large block letters, like the first that a child might try when taught.

Naruto stared up at the door, and the doorknob he couldn't reach; then, pragmatically, he slammed his hands into the door and began tearing out chunks as if it was made of carrion. He tore through the portal, and ran out the other side, into the strained sunlight, beneath the wildly twinkling feathers and faces and the green mats and blossoms of color that covered the streets of Konoha. The scent of pollen and pidgeonshit hung foul over the streets.

The blonde howled, calling out to a beast long dead in his belly, of teeth and jaws and red, creeping madness. The low, rolling mists of stagnant rage, and red eyes that reached out to slit throats with their marble-cores.

He howled, and inside him

**-* `**

*A beast-skeleton, chained in the roots of dandelions and briars, convulsed. Its head torqued upwards, and the toothless maw ripped open and screamed back. Pumice-glint gathered in the sockets, and all around, a red haze rose, boiling the chains away with putrescent heat.*

*It had no teeth, but bones instead; marrow-nails for paws, pikes for legs, a spined ram for a head. The world around it crinkled to pitch black and dead rage, irradiated breath, a primal, primitive hate like cancer in the soul.*

*A net of charred, fire-hardened gristle gripped the back of the skull, and tilted it upwards, to the dripping pipes and withering mold on the ceiling above, to where a boy screamed his nascent and endless fear, his loathing, confused and flailing sins, his shrieking, brutal fury and above it all the rupture of his throat as the howl tore ribbons of meat from the walls.*

*Ichor spilled from his mouth in a violent splatter, throwing itself across the street, as Naruto burnt away everything but the first thought in his mind, when his eyes formed inside his mother's womb, and the first thing he saw was: a different pair burned into the back of his eyelids. Red, slit, black dot in the middle.*

**EAT**

**~ * ~**

And he no longer knew who he was.

The King in Red howled.

# Eschaton

*Chapter Nine: Eschaton*

*The King in Red*

---

***DANTALION.***

*And he arose; a face many and none, a morphic echo of your mother, your father, your daughters and sons; a thing of clay and all answers and none. The flower of human knowledge burst within his skull and the pollen of its fruits was heady and strong.*

***ANDRAS.***

*And he arose; raven's feathers on wolf fur, hunched over and compact. Behind the veil flickered the lights of madness, like swamp gas or the dancing of the moon. His claws arced for the length of a man's arm, dripping ashen saliva. He hungered for the feast.*

***OSE.***

*And he arose; the liar behind the door, whose face is never seen. A thing of whispers and secrets and messages of paper, he crept between the lettters of all meaning and made it corrupt. Catlike, the leopard-spots of his body rippled into words that had no meaning.*

***RONOVE.***

*And he arose; The Eld Harvester. Sheppard of the aged and infirm, his crooked staff herded souls to their ultimate paralysis. A quiet man who breathed a gas of coma, to sleep and never awake. The dullness of domestic beasts shrouded the his bent form.*

*And they sat, or stood, or crawled, or writhed, before the King in Red; before the cracked and shattered body of a child, no hair upon*

*his chin. Blood ran from the rivets of his face where an unearthly voice had split open the seams, and the taut-strings of tendon had torn apart. He had no more strength to raise his hands, but there was hate enough say:*

***TAKE.***

*And they did so.*

---

Naruto laid on the pavement, bled and cried and laughed, rolling in puddles of his own blood and tears. The scent of necrotic meat surged through his nostrils, and he continued to laugh as the tanned skin of his forearms crinkled a sickly grey and began to flake off like snowflakes, melting in the open air and leaving nothing but pale salt behind. There was no words anymore left for this tiny, pitiful child.

Quite literally, for he had bitten off his tongue when he howled.

---

Dandelions burst into gargantuan flower and extended their curled stamens forward, tangling about the startled arms and legs, or heads of the people of Konoha. There was no salvation for those caught; they were dragged back into the tremendous blossoms, now the height of a man or more, and pulled into the yellow hearts.

A steaming hiss arose from those hearts, and a boiling hot, colorlessly spray of liquid jetted out, splattering the ground about. Little particles of brown or black hung suspended in the spills. Then the stamens unfurled again as their hues of yellow intensified to almost sun-bright gold.

Konoha was a village of ninja, but the leaves held no reprieve, and the stamen went on forever like cat's-cradle dementia and the equators of the earth. And between these things walked a thing of moulded clay, unintelligible and speechless. But with every man or woman or child welcomed into the golden hearts, the face of the clay would shift, and a little detail would appear. Maybe an eyebrow, or a

cheekbone; a perfect amalgam. But nothing could hide the hideous fringe of petals around its neck, like a jester's collar or a lion's mane. It flopped wearily from side to side as the clay strode, but never changed and never began to shift.

But as the dandelions grew to the size of mountains, shadowing the Hokage's tower, and Dantalion walked on a path of petals between rooftops, dropping seeds in the alleys between, he didn't seem to mind.

And those he faced soon began to lose grip on their kunai and shuriken when they saw his perfect face. Androgynous and lovely, they knelt before him and did not fight, as the dandelions took them home.

The last thought of Tenten's mind was delight, as she felt her face reach perfect proportions, beautiful beyond measure of man or woman.

*I am* , she thought peacefully, as the threads of her mind were picked apart and woven into vegetative strands, becoming a leaf of the blossom now planted where her home was.

---

Opposite Dantalion's peaceful merging, massacre took place. Andras, the King of Beasts roared into existence and tore a Jounin in half, blatantly ignoring the Earth Dragon that bulled into its side. With a vicious swipe, the dragon was split asunder and crumbled, and the berserker turned to another victim, screamed, and shoulder-blocked the apartment complex he had been taking cover in. Eight apartments ceased to exist as a two-story thing of bone, rage, and heated muscle crashed through.

The feathers of Andra's arms and legs took flight and whirled into shape, becoming hooked talons that swerved and screamed, tearing hunks of flesh from those not quick enough to dodge. Crow-things borne on dozens of spindly, twitching legs skittered about and launched themselves at anything they could see, scrabbling at

movement, heat, and life. A dozen of them crowded about the Beast and scratched at him, but he paid no mind.

Kunai rained down; clones bounded in and slashed; exploding tags turned acres of flesh into charred and blasted expanses.

Andras kept moving. His flesh *steamed* with contempt as it bubbled towards wholeness, never stopping or hesitating. The metal of weaponry cracked as it was drawn within, and then emerged on his back as deadly spines.

And he never, never stopped howling.

But finally the ANBU appeared, row on row of red and black; a faceless beast to match the one before them. The Beast stood on his hind legs, smiled and hissed.

And from between his twinkling feathers dropped a river of crow-walkers, panic and discord and screeching fear, flooding over their element dragons, flame blasts and thunder, earth walls and water surges and the gigantic tree that erupted from below. They surged over the ANBU line, pecking endlessly and annoyingly.

They were only a distraction for the Beast himself, who crashed into the disorganized ranks and began a slaughter.

---

Ose walked in misery, but not a soul struck out at him; he was above their quarrels. Wives buried butcher knives in their husbands as he passed. Children forced baseballs and toys down each other's throats and writhed in homoerotic suicide. Toddlers rolled onto their faces and drowned in their soft, gentle pillows.

Mangled language rippled over his paper-white skin. Inken tides surged and left kanji that looked too oddly rounded, too sharp on the edges; as if seen through a telescope, bent by the intervening space. Ose's muzzle ticked, but he made no sound.

Nothing more than a leopard stood upright, he paused and looked about, at the few that remained pure of his moon-madness. It was this that let him dodge the seething mass of insects that descended from above. Graceful as his form suggested, he streaked out of the way, leaving white-and-black stains on the air as if he was a dripping easel.

Ose glanced upwards, and saw a boy with his overcoat tight on his form, a collar tucked about his chin; the child stood on the edge of a building overhead, isolated from the rioting populace. Expressionless glasses glared as the vermin came about again. Liquid as smoke, the leopard dashed out of the way and, as if gravity had no meaning, up the intervening space.

The boy drew a pair of kamas with expertise, and closed his eyes; but there was no help as Ose came near, limblessly dodging the wild swipes.

He heard " *SShhi-no* ;" his name, distorted through sibilant lips. Shino's mind shuddered away from a sudden, slick grasp. Twice more the kamas sang out, dividing lines of air with their razor sharpness.

Then again; " *Sshhi-no* ."

And again. " *Sshhi-no.* "

And again. " *Sshhi-no.* "

And again. " *Sshhi-no.* "

And again. An echo of endless reverberations caught inside the carapace of his skull. The scream of a bat in a cage or the sound of water dripping in a box.

Shino sucked in a breath, staggered back and opened his eyes, and read the kanji of his name across the smiling lips of the leopard.

The kamas swung upwards and embedded with a *thunk* into the boy's eye sockets. He slumped and died.

Ose smiled and went on.

---

From the tower, Sarutobi watched this all; and heard the sounds as the door creaked open, and weathered feet padded across the carpet.

The Hokage robe and hat had already been slung aside on the chair, besides the stamp and an aged picture of Team 7; the original and the new. Both had the grease of fingertips on their glassy frames, recent and old.

The old man stood before the window, armored in ANBU uniform. The sigil of the Fire Shadow gleamed upon his breast.

He was the God of Shinobi: Sarutobi Hiruzen.

The Hokage's wrinkled face turned to regard his visitor. It was a visage that called to his own; a human form, the lines of age just starting to overlie a tanned face. Black hair, sprinkled with grey, hung over eyes the color of darker nights; a deep blue-and-black embrace. A Sheppard's crook *thumped* against the floor with a final ring.

"You will not take my village from me." Sarutobi said softly, staring across the expanse of his desk at his visitor. "You will not overcome the will of fire."

The visitor inclined his head patiently. There was no hurry in any of his movements.

"Perhaps not." he murmured.

Sarutobi clapped his hands together, and started to make hand seals when he felt all the strength in him flow out and drain into the floor; like a long autumn shower had fallen onto his shoulders, and with its

drops his vitality had gone. Gasping for suddenly distant breath, Sarutobi sagged against the wall, forcing himself back upright with a hand.

The visitor stood, unmoving and watchful. There was a knowing in his eyes that took Sarutobi's breath away; the weight of ages, of *his* age drawing on his shoulders and bearing him down to the earth, where he could curl up and sleep, to rest. An inevitable plummet that Hiruzen felt to the tips of his fingers, and he watched in disgusted self-recrimination as his digits turned pale and lifeless, immobile.

Sarutobi closed his eyes, drew in a long breath. His back rested against the wall for all of a moment.

" *No* ." he said, drawing himself straight and locking gazes with his foe. There was a crunch as Sarutobi slammed his fist off-angle into the windowsill, breaking two fingers on his left hand; the pain briefly gave him focus.

Without pause he drew a kunai, slammed it through the palm of his other hand - *OH but that HURT!* - the force projecting it straight through to embed in the ceiling just before the west wall. Sarutobi brought his hands up before him and sealed.

*I have been here too long* , he thought.

*Snake.*

*I have made too many mistakes.*

*Boar.*

*I have seen too much suffering.*

*Sheep.*

*And I will die here.*

*Rabbit.*

*But I will not go alone.*

*Dog.*

*I will not abandon my village, the heart of fire to you*

*Rat.*

*For everyone I've failed*

*Bird.*

*I give everything for you.*

*Horse.*

*. . . i just want to lie down so bad*

*Snake.*

*. . . I GIVE EVERYTHING!*

A clap. Sarutobi breathed deep, and completed the signs of the Shiki Fuujin, smiling softly even in the end as he closed his eyes. At least, he would follow in the footsteps of the man he had failed so badly. For his age and proposed wisdom, he didn't seem to have many options after all.

But at least he had pride.

Four seconds later, Sarutobi opened his eyes and stared into the dead-dull black of the visitor's eyes, who stood before the Hokage. Face-to-face.

Nothing happened.

Sarutobi's eyelids fluttered once, and he slumped to the floor; there was a loud pop as his hip gave out underneath the sudden, awkward weight. But there was no cry of pain as the Hokage struck the floor.

Slowly, he curled up into a ball, hands coming up against his face. The very tip of his wrinkled thumb rested against his chapped and open lips.

His mouth closed. There was a sigh; and stillness, except for the rising and falling of Sarutobi's chest.

Konove looked at the curled form on the floor for a moment. Then he turned and slipped out the door, closing it with a soft click behind him.

The elderly man on the floor did not notice.

---

Konoha burned. A terrible quartet had descended onto its populace and stolen their minds away; sealed into perfect floors, or squashed like grapes against the floor, between toes. The scent of spilt blood was overwhelmed with pollen and ink, except where Andra lingered; the stink of feathers and rotting blood followed him like a court, crow-walker nobles scattered about in frenetic lines.

In his puddle of vomit and tears, Naruto heaved himself up and stared at the shapes of flowers, rising towards the moon; if he watched carefully he could see where the tendrils spiraled upwards. He watched in wonder as one plucked a point of light out of the sky, and drew it downwards into the heart. A moment later, the blossom began to softly glow, and little pistils came out, with tiny forms of people on them. He thought he recognized Tenten on one; she sat on a petal and stroked it, betwitched. A spiderweb of wispy roots fell from the bun of her hair and trailed back into the flower's heart.

Naruto laid his head back against the pavement, as the ground rumbled and Andra stalked by, growls and whispers emanating from his primitive form; spindly, flightless birds leapt about on top of his flesh and picked away the gobbets of meat and dried blood. Where the Beast was wounded, the bird drooled on the flesh; and soon, the gash steamed and writhed to a close. Besides him, on the lake, the boy watched a corpse-white leopard, standing upright, skate over the

water. It was strangely graceful; and where his paws touched ink spread over the water in silent, rippling patterns, the birth of an eternal tesseract on the waters of Konoha's reservoir.

And Naruto looked up, as Ronove came near, and extended his hand; and Naruto smiled and would have said thank you, but he had not the tongue to do so. Instead he took the Sheppard's hand, and looped his arm over the welcome shoulder, and staggered towards the lake.

The ripples were beautiful; and Naruto could look at them and read; here, when he had first killed a man, scooping away flesh with the red of his claws; and here, when that woman (Cardinal?) had wrapped her arms around him once, and he had felt a hug. There were stories in the water, so many of them; and so many were stories of Naruto, calling him to the cool surface of his bier.

He wondered briefly where Cardinal was; and then shook his head gently, knowing his gift wasn't one to be given away. She would carry it, and bless them, and die.

And she would be happy, like him.

The blonde nodded to Ronove, mouthing 'thank you'; but the old Sheppard shook his head in return, and pushed Naruto gently towards the lake.

"You gave us everything." the Sheppard said, crossing his arms. And then he knelt, and pressed his head to the ground below, dirt and grass. In his penitence, he was still.

"Thank you."

Naruto paled slightly in shock, and looked around; but there, on a ruined store, was Dantalion. His petal-hands were raised in farewell, and fond remembrance. The pistils and stamens of the great dandelions slowed, and then they were still.

Andras's mighty fangs brushed the gravel as his head lowered as well, even lower than Ronove's. The scrabbling crows stilled, and knelt as well. They were still.

And Ose, he stopped upon the lake and bent as well, muzzle just passing the surface of the inken lake. The meaning-waters of his skin was still.

The boy's eyes teared up, and nitrous trails flowed down; burning and cracking the surface of his flesh, boiling it away. But he felt no pain; he nodded, and mouthed something else.

No one heard it; their heads were held low, and away from his lips. Even Ose could not tell, for Naruto faced away from him.

The boy turned, and glanced downward into the waters; he saw faces there, and knew them all, but he couldn't say their names. So he waded out into the white-and-black, until it came up to his waist; and the water was warm, and never moved, never rippled but for the beloved ones below.

And the blonde scooped up some water in his hands; it took him many tries, because the water spilled between the blades of his fingers. But every time a little more clung to his hands, until a sphere of monochrome rested on his palms.

In it, he saw the face of an older blonde, a mantle on his shoulders; a prosperous village behind him, in the shadow of a mountain with the faces of heroes. His eyes gleamed a wonderful, deep blue, like the boy had never seen.

He had never seen such wonderfully beautiful eyes.

Naruto closed his own, and fell forward into the lake, without a splash, or a ripple. The waters swallowed him whole, and *everything* - was still.

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**APOCRYPHA**

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In the distant land of Sunagakure, a woman raised her head and blinked, scratching at the spiraling bald strip in the depths of her hair.

She thought she had seen something out of the corner of her eye.

The spiral itched.

---

*Ronove touched the familiar brow.*

" ***WAKE.*** *" he said, softly, but the words echoed through the water.*

*Two bright eyes slid open, and the world took a breath and awoke; the moment between dawn and morning, asleep and aware swelled and became great. A kingdom settled in the border, a place of windows, paintings, and halls; but no doors.*

*Winaohud, the Waker, straightened, his slow eyes caressing the depths of the lake.*

" *Hello." he murmured, and a soft clacking began from his fingers.*

---

Jiraya stood in silent disbelief before where Konoha had once been. Suddenly as swift as he was in his prime, he dashed away from the floral citadel, clouded in rains of feathers. He didn't miss thefact that each and every feather's edge glinted, and the aged crimson stain on each.

He pulled a summoning scroll from his pouch, bit his thumb, and then smeared it on the parchment; there was a puff of smoke, and then nothing.

Jiraya staggered. Sarutobi was dead. Most likely, so was everyone else.

He redoubled his pace, heading towards the closest post of his spy network. The Princess would need to know; if only so she could laugh and be free of the village she had disliked so long.

He would bet this was Orochimaru's fault, somehow.

---

*Cardinal opened her eyes, and began to stretch.*

*Then she felt the phantom caress of talons across the top of her head, and she whipped around, not entirely awake but struggling towards the surface.*

*She saw a blank white wall; her bedroom was painted green.*

*She turned around and saw another blank white wall.*

*She turned one last time, and looked to where the window of her room had been; it was still there, and there was a little face in the corner, shrouded in blonde hair.*

" *Hello." he said, and Cardinal felt a heartbeat, twin to her own, pulse in the crown of her head.*

---

Sarutobi opened his eyes, and saw a man with a flower for a head, standing before him. He had the most beautiful face he had ever seen.

Sarutobi opened his mouth, and said "huuungwry."

Dantalion fed him.

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**FIN**

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*There is no greater strangeness than in the heart of your own child.*

*-Gleam*